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## A brief guide to using exercises and games to enhance group dynamics

This section of the *Notes* provides training materials for participatory learning, exploring a different theme in each issue. This issue explores how games and exercises can be used to enhance learning in a workshop setting. The principal emphasis is on creating an environment in which individuals and groups feel free to *experience, reflect* and *change*. Games and exercises are invaluable for:

- relaxing participants;
- stimulating the flow of communication between strangers;
- bringing private expectations and group reality closer;
- encouraging everyone to participate and learn;
- rounding off or introducing a new session;
- developing new skills; and,
- exposing participants to new ways of judging and reflecting on their own actions.

The enjoyment that can be created by games and exercises acts as a basis for group cohesion and openness. Each activity emphasises a particular message, sometimes only to be revealed to participants as the exercise ends.

### • Using games and exercises

Games and exercises are known to be useful in a range of workshop situations and institutional and cultural contexts, but some words of caution are necessary. First, the activities must be explained carefully. Trainees see workshop exercises in quite a different way to the trainer. They do not know what to expect or what is the purpose of the particular exercise.

To offset nervousness, panic or plain suspicion, remain informal and relaxed.

Explain the objectives clearly, and where required, draw attention to the relevance to their work or the goals of the workshop. If necessary, start the exercise yourself by giving the first example or presentation. Some participants may think that exercises are ‘silly’ or ‘only for kids’, until they realise the deeper learning points. Sometimes those who are reluctant to take part gain enthusiasm and confidence by watching others participating and enjoying themselves.

However, training should not be seen as non-stop entertainment. Exercises should be balanced with sufficient time for reflection and discussion. Too little reflection and too much action leaves participants confused and frustrated. Remember, it is not the quantity of activities but their quality that counts. If you have limited time, it is often better to carry out one exercise completely than do three quickly.

You must be well organised when you are using exercises. In particular you need to consider how they will link with other parts of your training programme. You can use a game for a smooth transition to shift the group to the next phase of training. When energy levels are low, participants are getting frustrated or bored, or there is tension in the air, an energising game can work well.

### • Debriefing after the exercise

Effective training follows a pattern of reflection, action and reflection. Therefore, at the conclusion of an exercise, be sure that you leave sufficient time to debrief with the participants. During this reflective stage, the most important lessons are learned. As a trainer, it is tempting to take over, but give participants the chance to draw their own conclusion. Ask: *How do you think it went?*

*What did you think of the way you handled....? How did this compare with the way you deal with issues in real life?* etc.. Many exercises require debriefing in groups. It is important that you allow sufficient time for groups to prepare and present their findings to plenary.

As participants wind down after an exercise, make a smooth transition into general discussion about underlying themes. This is particularly important when the exercise has involved role play. Questions can be prepared in advance:

- Has the exercise revealed general difficulties which are similar to problems in the real world?
- Has it revealed new insights?
- What has this exercise shown about obstacles to ideal solutions?

Never feel disappointed if an exercise does not work to plan, or when participants appear to make mistakes. As a trainer, you can never predict completely the outcome of an exercise. Most importantly, do not let the fear of failure stop you trying something new next time.

### • Types of games and exercises

There are six main categories of group process exercises and games which are effective in participatory training:

- introductions;
- energisers and group formation exercises;
- group dynamics exercises;
- listening exercises;
- analytical exercises; and,
- evaluation exercises.

Some exercises have multiple learning points. For example, the 'Buses' game in *Tips for Trainers*, this issue, describes a game that can be used for introductions and group forming.



### Getting started

When people come together to take part in a workshop, it is important to make them feel welcome and part of a group. Introductions are important to get everyone, especially the shy people, involved and talking to one another at the beginning of the training.

Conventional introductions involve stating name, past history and current status. This means barriers and hierarchies are established right away. To avoid this, it is better that participants are introduced in ways which encourage a greater sense of equality between them. Exercises should help create an open and trusting atmosphere that gains participants' commitment early in the workshop.



When people meet for the first time there is often a degree of nervousness. They may be uncertain about what to do after they have said hello. Initial conversation is likely to be guarded and superficial. Any attempt to relax the group and break the ice must offer the group members the following:

- a safe, clear and acceptable structure;
- conversation subjects which are both interesting and non-threatening;
- enough scope for making and receiving distinct impressions of each other (but preventing competition);
- some action, where possible, to relieve the tension; and,
- the possibility of laughter, for the same reason.

Some of the most effective exercises for breaking the ice and getting the training started include paired interviewing, grouping exercises (see *Tips for Trainers*, this issue) and those which involve drawing. Portrait drawing

is particularly good as an icebreaker as it can cause great amusement and is a good leveller.

### Picking up the tempo

*Energisers* are games that energise the group. They can be vital in maintaining the momentum of training. During the first session or in the session immediately after lunch, participants can be distracted and tired. Energisers are quick amusing games that get everyone moving (see *Tips for Trainers, RRA Notes 15*, May 1992).

*Group formation* is necessary in training workshops on participatory methods as they should involve a lot of intensive group work. There is a constant need to form groups of different sizes and compositions. Games can be an extremely useful way of forming groups in an entertaining and non-threatening manner. They can be used for random mixing or for purposive formation of groups, such as by gender, age, profession, origin etc. (see also *Tips for Trainers*, this issue and *RRA Notes 19*, Special Issue on Training, February 1994).

### Keeping it together

Games and exercises can be valuable in helping people through the various stages in group development (see *A brief guide to group dynamics and team building, PLA Notes 29*, June 1997). The aims are to demonstrate the power of working in groups, to encourage individuals to respond openly to others and to abandon preconceived ideas. Exercises can bring difficult issues of conflict and dominance out into the open in a non-threatening way (see *Tips for Trainers, PLA Notes 23*, June 1995 and *PLA Notes 26*, June 1996).

### Learning to listen

Adopting a listening and learning attitude is central to training for participatory learning and action, particularly when it comes to fieldwork and direct contact with local people. Games and exercises can help to shift people's views, allowing participants the chance to reflect on how they behaved during the exercise (see *Tips for Trainers PLA Notes 22*, February 1995 and *PLA Notes 27*, October 1996).

### Learning to reflect

Good participatory training should permit and encourage reflection on how we learn and observe, including realisation of how our personal experiences and our personality influence what we see. These games and exercises focus on how we observe and remember, what we ignore, how we assimilate new information, and how difficult it is to be objective. Games and exercises that highlight the biases and complications of the learning and analysis process can generate important insights during the workshop (see *Tips for Trainers, RRA Notes 17*).

### Summing it up

As a trainer, it is important continually to evaluate how the workshop is developing and how to adjust your programme to meet these changing conditions. Formal evaluations are usually less appropriate in such cases, and so quicker, more participatory alternatives are necessary (see *Tips for Trainers, PLA Notes 25*).

#### TRAINERS' CHECKLIST

- Have you carefully selected exercises to complement your other training methods?
- How will you explain the purpose of the game or exercise to the participants?
- How will you debrief after each exercise?
- Is the room the right size and shape for the exercises you selected?
- Can the chairs and tables be arranged to suit your purposes?
- Have you thought carefully about where you will stand or sit yourself during the exercises?

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*Next issue: Principles of Participatory Learning and Action.*